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SUBJECT: CODEL BAIRD MEETS IRAQI PARLIAMENT LEADERSHIP

Classified by Acting Political Counselor Robert Gilchrist for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: Representatives Brian Baird (D-WA) and Christopher Shays (R-CT) met Council of Representatives (CoR) Speaker Mahmoud Mashadani and First Deputy Speaker Khalid al-Atiya for a review of the situation in Iraq on May 22. The Speaker gave a Sunni perspective, with al-Atiya naturally focused on the Shi'a view. Noting how his detention by U.S. forces had altered his perspective, the Speaker praised U.S.-Iraq cooperation and said an "objective" withdrawal of forces, based on the training of Iraqi counterparts, should be our focus. He called for a cabinet of apolitical ministers and said the CoR would not delay legislation if the cabinet submits it in a timely manner. He concluded with emphasis on the Sunni nature of the Arab world and the need for a western (away from Iran) orientation for Iraq. Al-Atiya, in a separate meeting, put an emphasis on the need for the Sunni to accept their minority status and temper ambitions for more control. He said the PM needs more control over security operations, the Kurds need prodding on the oil law, and all need to exploit opportunities for peaceful coexistence. End summary.

Speaker Mashadani  
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¶2. (C) The Speaker noted that he once opposed the U.S. and ended up as a detainee; his perspective changed in prison and he left incarceration as a friend of the U.S. He said 11 days of U.S. interrogation brought out his inner desire to serve his nation and now he enjoys our cooperation; he said he has applied the same "culture of dialogue" in CoR deliberations. In fact, he quipped, the Shi'a and Kurdish members "like me more than the Sunni."

¶3. (C) Mashadani spoke of the need for an "objective" withdrawal of coalition forces, based on the capability of Iraqi forces to fill the security vacuum. He said a timeline for building Iraqi forces was more logical than a timeline for U.S. withdrawal; if the GoI does not meet a force-building timeline, "you have the moral right to leave."

National reconciliation initiatives are a necessary underpinning of a stable Iraq. He called for a cabinet of technocrats not beholden to any political party, leaving party politics to the CoR. Sectarian allotments in the cabinet lead to complaints from all sides, he added, and put the PM under undue political pressure.

¶4. (C) The CoR's summer recess should be a CoR decision, not one made under external pressure. Nonetheless, many members find Baghdad more secure than their districts and would be willing to continue working into the summer. He said the CoR had not been the cause of delay for any GoI-proposed law up to this point, but was always waiting for a slow cabinet to forward drafts for consideration. The GoI should not remain in the hands of one sect, he opined, but Shi'a control the portfolios of the PM, Finance, Oil, and National Security.

15. (C) The Speaker called for balanced approaches by Iraq's neighbors to the east (Iran) and west (Syria), both of which could help control terror if they so chose. He wanted to break the link between Syria and Iran and recommended Arab investment in Syria, Jordan, and Kurdistan as a stabilizing factor. He hoped to convince all political blocs in Iraq that the nation's stability will benefit more from working with the Arabs than with Iran -- an orientation which would help avoid a clash with the secular west (as opposed to the "extreme religious system" in Iran). He suggested that Iraq's majority Shi'a recognized the need for a western outlook yet must acknowledge the reality of a regional Arab (not Persian) majority as well. Iraq is an Arab country allied with the "Sunni" Arab League.

Deputy Speaker al-Atiya  
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16. (C) Al-Atiya said it would take the nation some time to recover from many years of suffering. Many had reacted badly to the political process started after the fall of Saddam, boycotting opportunities for cooperation, spreading intolerance, and settling scores with one another. There is no intent on the part of the majority Shi'a to marginalize any minority, he said, although the Sunni must accept election results and the fact that they can no longer dominate. The Sunni seek to regain their historical grasp on power "with outside help," he stated, aided by Arab states' instinct for self-preservation (by maintaining Sunni control). Similar fears beset the Shi'a, who can also display a "closed" mentality harking back to fears of the old regime. The Iranians, focused as they are on the U.S. and Israel, also make the political process difficult. As for the Kurds, this group is trying to "exploit the political

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process" to overcome a historical sense of exclusion -- assertively claiming more than is their due.

17. (C) Permanent stability in Iraq will require all groups to live in harmony and wield power "appropriate to the size of their community," said al-Atiya, without political exclusion or economic marginalization for any party. This basic understanding should lead to peaceful coexistence domestically, assuming limited external interference. Representative Shays noted that land-locked Kurdistan may harbor popular calls for independence, but that responsible leaders recognize the real need to work within the framework of Iraqi unity. He called for the CoR to take leadership in resolving key legislative priorities, including on oil, de-Ba'athification reform, and provincial elections to bring all parties together.

18. (C) On security, Shays cited confusing polls stating that "two thirds of Iraqis want U.S. forces to leave but two thirds want them to stay." Sheikh Khalid cited the biggest mistake in Iraq as the delayed building of Iraqi security forces. Elements of the current UN mandate have not been fulfilled, he lamented. The GoI must take steps to build Iraqi capacity, but it needs to have a freer hand to strike at terror without hurdles put in its way. When the PM gets close to striking Sunni targets, he often senses unnecessary roadblocks. Iraq needs help to counter Arab countries plotting against it, he added.

19. (C) The Kurds are dragging their feet in negotiations on the oil law, said al-Atiya, while the Sunni are close to an agreement. A helpful U.S. role must continue. Baird emphasized the need for the American people to see progress on reconciliation and security. Setting a timeline for U.S. withdrawal is problematic, said al-Atiya, but it all boils down to taking advantage of opportunities ahead to signal Iraqi capacity for coexistence. The GoI also needs to have full authority on security to counter any terror threat. Iraq indeed has the natural energies and resources to be a regional leader, agreed the Deputy Speaker.

